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THE SOIL CONSERVATION PROGRAM IN THE WESTERN STATES

A radio talk by C. C. Conser, Assistant Director, Western States Division, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, broadcast Wednesday, April 8, 1936, in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour by WMAL and 49 other stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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The latest news from the Western Region is that farmers are attending county meeting this week to hear details of the new soil conservation program. Those of you in counties where meetings have not been held yet, may have plenty of questions to ask about some of the details, but I'm sure all of you know the general idea of the program.

That idea is to call a halt to the over-cropping and erosion which have been needlessly damaging our crop land. One of the best ways -- and the one which is the backbone of the new farm program -- is to shift land from crops that harm the land to crops that are good for it. In practice that means stopping excess planting of cash crops that deplete the soil, and increasing plantings of grasses and legumes. Farmers who measure up to approved standards of soil conservation and soil improvement will be eligible for payments this year.

What we have then, is a program that primarily aims at cutting down soil depletion and erosion. We hope incidentally that it may be helpful in preventing big surpluses of some of our export crops from piling up. Another point is well worth considering, too. It is a good-farming program.

It gives farmers a better chance to farm the way they know they should. Dust storms are not new. No thoughtful farmer ever has been able to see good rich topsoil blowing away without caring. But many farmers have been unable to afford shifting land out of cash crops into crops which hold the soil where it belongs. Payments under the new program put good-farming methods within reach of every farmer.

That national effort does not mean that farmers will be asked to follow some method that does not fit the needs of their part of the country. The new program allows for differences between some regions. An example is the way it meets the wind erosion problem.

This is the problem which chiefly concerns the west. So in the west the soil conservation program will be aimed especially at combatting wind erosion. Crops and farm practices that reduce the blowing of topsoil will be on the approved list in the western region, even though they may not all be on the list in other regions.

I just mentioned farming practices. That's not a technical phrase, of course. But it is one of a few phrases that are used all of the time as the new program develops. Right now is a good time to define those phrases as they are used in connection with the program.

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A soil depleting crop leaves the soil poorer than before the crop was planted, and also usually leaves it subject to severe erosion.

A soil conserving crop maintains the fertility of the soil and reduces erosion.

A soil building crop both reduces erosion and increases fertility.

A soil building practice either reduces erosion or increases fertility. Examples of the latter might be liming or terracing.

A soil depleting base acreage is a farm's total base acreage in soil depleting crops. All such crop acreages will be added together to form one total, except for five special crops. Each of those crops will have special bases.

The five special crops are cotton, tobacco, sugar beets, flax, and rice.

Here is the list of other soil depleting crops for the western division -- the ones a farmer adds together to arrive at his general soil depleting base: Small grains such as wheat, oats, or barley harvested for grain or hay, corn, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, commercial truck and canning crops, grain sorghums and sweet sorghums, annual grasses harvested for grain or seed, and summer legumes harvested for grain or hay. Other crops may be added to the list later.

Farmers who want to be eligible for payments this year will get together soon with their committeemen and make out a work sheet for their farms. The county committee will check that information and establish a soil depleting base for each farm. The starting point for figuring that base will be the acreage the farmer had last year in soil depleting crops. Certain adjustments will be made, to allow for such things as acres retired under any of the adjustment programs, or for unusual planting conditions caused by drought or floods. Making out a work sheet does not obligate anybody to anything, but is necessary if a man wants to be eligible for payments later in the year.

There will be two classes of payment.

Farmers will receive Class I payments for planting some of their soil depleting base acreage to approved soil building or soil conserving crops. For the country as a whole, the Class I payment will average \$10 an acre, but if a farmer's land is lower in productivity than the average farm land for the country his payment will be under the \$10 average. On the other hand, if his land is found to be better, his payments will be increased accordingly. A farmer may receive payments for planting as much as 15 per cent of his soil depleting base to either soil conserving or soil building crops. There are no minimum requirements, but if a farmer has a total acreage in soil conserving and soil building crops which is less than the 15 percent for which he could receive payments, then his payments are subject to deductions.

In addition to the Class I payment, farmers may also earn Class II, or soil-building payments. Those payments will be made for planting soil-building crops on the land taken out of soil depleting crops. They will be made, too, for using soil building practices on either the land taken out of soil depleting crops or on other acreage on the farm. The Class II payments will vary according to the crops planted and the practices approved. The total for any farm of this class of payment cannot be more than an amount equal to the number of acres in soil conserving or soil building crops on the farm in 1936 multiplied by \$1. This is NOT a dollar an acre rate. It is merely a method of setting a top limit on the amount of the Class II payment which may be obtained for any farm.

Here is an example of the payments farmers may earn: Suppose a farmer has a 480 acre farm. On this farm there is a soil depleting base acreage of 400 acres, also 20 acres in alfalfa, and 60 acres in permanent pasture, homestead, etc. We can count of that 60 acres, as far as the program is concerned. The farmer plants of his soil depleting base, 15 percent, or 60 acres, in alfalfa. Then for 1936 he would have 340 acres in soil depleting crops, 80 acres in alfalfa including the 20 acres of old alfalfa, and the 60 acres of permanent pasture, and homestead. If the rate of payment for his farm were average he could receive a Class I payment on 60 acres which at \$10 an acre would give him \$600. Since the planting of alfalfa is soil building, not just soil conserving, the farmer qualifies for a Class II payment in addition to his Class I payment. Suppose the state committee set the rate for planting alfalfa at \$1.50 an acre, (that is just a supposition; the real rate has not been set.) A dollar and a half an acre for 60/¹⁹³⁶ acres of alfalfa would be \$90. The farmer would get only \$80, however, for his total acreage in soil building and conserving crops is only 80. Eighty plus 600 makes the farmer's total payment for the year, \$680.

Two of the special crops are particularly important in the western division. These are sugar beets and flaxseed. The United States does not grow enough of these crops for its own needs, so the soil conservation program does not require shifts of sugar and flax, base acreage. It merely requires that for each acre in sugar beets or flax the farmer have the equivalent of a certain percentage of such acreage in soil conserving and soil building crops. The acreage so used in connection with these crops is to be in addition to any used in connection with the general soil conservation program.

For sugar beets, the Class I payment will be $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents per 100 pounds raw value of the sugar recoverable from the acreage in sugar beets, up to the base acreage for sugar beets. For flax, the Class I payment is to be 20 cents a bushel on the average yield on the acreage in flax.

Many questions remain to be settled before the program can be put fully into operation. Many of these concern the classification of crops and the establishment of certain practices such as summer fallowing. Your county agent or committeeman will keep you in touch with those decisions as fast as they can be made.

Another important question for the western states has not yet been settled. That is the problem of the range. An intensive study of the entire range problem is being made, and as soon as any definite proposals can be made they will be presented to the range interests for discussion.

